

How Can We Co-Create New Social Realities?

Speech by **Adam Kahane** to the 3rd SoL Global Forum

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What I would like to do today is to offer you a question that I have been asking myself for fifteen years: How can we co-create new social realities? These days I am asking myself this question using two particular and unconventional words: How can we co-create new social realities with all of our *power* and all of our *love*?

Let me put this question in another way. I have come to Oman this week from my home country of Canada via South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and Israel. So I have had an opportunity to reflect on how different peoples have worked with each other and against each other in trying to create new social realities. In particular, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon of the settler society. On the one hand, I have been filled with admiration for the entrepreneurial imagination and courage of pioneers who leave their homelands in order to try to create, in what they see as empty space, new social realities. On the other hand, I have been filled with horror at the devastation that this pioneering mindset often produces.

In Australia, the conflict between the settlers who arrived in 1777 and the indigenous people who had arrived 40,000 years ago has been expressed in terms of the doctrine of *terra nullius*, a Roman legal term meaning “land belonging to no one” or “empty land.” It was only in 1992 that the Australian High Court ruled that Australia had in fact never been *terra nullius*, and that the modern-day settlers had to work out a new way of living together with the indigenous people.

I am giving you this history because one crucial reality that we that we all need to come to terms with is that none of us are living in *terra nullius*. Our world is not empty. It is full, of a dense web of human and other living systems. Our social reality is full of diverse stakeholders and mental models and inter-connections. And our atmosphere is full of carbon dioxide. So the question we are all faced with now is: How can we co-create new social realities, not in a world that is empty, but in a world that is full?

Let me tell you how I came to be asking myself this question. My university studies at McGill were in physics and at Berkeley were in energy and environmental economics. In 1988, I went to work for Royal Dutch Shell in London and became head of the sociopolitical-economic-environmental scenario team. In 1991, one year Nelson Mandela was released from prison, a group of South African leaders—black and white; from the opposition and the establishment; from politics, business, and civil society—formed a team that wanted to use the Shell scenario methodology to think together about the way forward beyond apartheid. This is how I came to facilitate the meetings of what became known as the Mont Fleur Scenario Exercise. The key thing I learned in South Africa is that it *is* possible for a highly diverse group of leaders from across a social system, even ones who have literally been at war with one another, to engage in a creative and constructive process of co-creation: to tell a new set of stories about possible futures and to work together to bring forward a better future.

There was a joke at the time in South Africa, that faced with our overwhelmingly complex problems, we have two options: a practical option and a miraculous option. The practical

option is that we all get out of our chairs and down on our knees and pray for a band of angels to come down and solve our problems for us. The miraculous option is that we stay in our chairs, talk with one another, and work our problems through together. In the event, South Africans, much to their own and the world's surprise, chose and implemented the miraculous option. They found a way to live together in a world that is full. They found a way to co-create a new social reality.

For the past fifteen years, I have been single-mindedly following this thread that I picked up at Mont Fleur. I have, with my colleagues, worked with all kinds of tri-sector leadership teams, on all sorts of complex challenges, in all parts of the world, including in Guatemala, to implement the Peace Accords; in India, to reduce child malnutrition; in the United States, to rejuvenate the northern Great Plains; in South Africa, to respond to the crisis of orphans and vulnerable children; in Canada, to shift to a low-carbon economy; and across Europe and the Americas, to make food systems more sustainable.

Now when I look with the eyes of a physicist on my fifteen years of experience with trying to create new social realities, what I see is that we are working with two fundamental forces or drives, which I call power and love. I recognized these two drives when I read Martin Luther King's last speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Convention, where he said: "Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change"—now this is a definition of power that a physicist can understand. He then went on to say: "One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. We've got to get this thing right. What [we need to realize is] that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic....It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time."

Now when King chose the words power and love, he was drawing on the writings of Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich uses precise and unconventional definitions of power and love that resonate with my own experience. He defines power as "the drive of everything living to realize itself with increasing intensity and extensity." So power in this sense is the drive to grow, to achieve purpose, to get the job done. Power has both a generative face—power-to—and a degenerative face—power-over. And Tillich defines love as "the drive towards the unity of the separated." So love in this sense is the drive to connect, to be whole, to bridge gulfs. Love has both a potent face and an impotent face.

Now I could give you many examples of what King refers to as the collision between power and love. The struggle for civil rights in the United States involved both the power drive of blacks and whites to get on with living their lives as they wanted to, and also the love drive to find a way to live together. The struggle of business involves both the competition between companies, each getting on with their own business, and the need for companies to do this in a way that is socially responsible. And the struggle around climate change involves both each of us getting on with our own activities, and burning fossil fuels in doing so, and the limits of the one earth on which we all live.

But the example I would like to focus on this morning is from a workshop I co-facilitated last week with members of the SoL community in Israel. It was held in Southern Israel, in Eilat, next to the Red Sea, adjoining Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The workshop was of a

project called “The Jewish-Israeli Journey.” This project is looking for answers to the question: What kind of Israeli society can we envisage, to which we and our descendants would be proud to belong, and in which we could live in friendship with non-Jewish Israelis, with our Palestinians neighbors, and with the wider region? The project involves leaders from all parts of Jewish-Israeli society—left and right; religious and secular; politicians, business people, rabbis, and activists—struggling to work together create a new way forward for their society.

The workshop in Eilat gave me one of the clearest views I have ever had of the collision between power and love. On the one hand, Israel exemplifies the phenomenon of power, the phenomenon of the settler society, in all its generative and degenerative aspects. Israel exemplifies the drive of a people, rising out of the near-extinction of the Holocaust, to realize themselves intensively and extensively—and the conflicts that that drive can produce. And this same phenomenon was present in the room in Eilat, with each of the participants seized by the drive to realize themselves, to be true to themselves, to argue their point of view passionately—and the tough arguments that that drive produced.

But there was also a second phenomenon present in that room. One morning we had a long, heartfelt dialogue about inclusion and exclusion within Israeli society. It seemed to me that every part of Israeli society feels excluded: the religious, the secular, the settlers, the Arabs, the Russians, the Ethiopians. I could hear the pain in people’s voices, but I couldn’t make out why this conversation was so important to the group. Then suddenly I saw what *wasn’t* there. It’s like the joke about Sherlock Holmes and Watson on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Holmes wakes Watson up and asks him: “Watson, what do you see?” Watson is used to these tests of his skills of observation and he starts to answer, “I see the twinkling stars, I see the rising moon, I see the passing clouds,” but Holmes interrupts him and says, “No Watson, you idiot! Someone stole our tent!” The pain in the room in Eilat was the pain of the longing for what *wasn’t* there: for a sense of inclusion, of connection, of oneness. This is the phenomenon of love: the drive towards the unity of the separated. The pain in the room was the longing of Jewish-Israelis to be united with one another, and also with non-Jewish Israelis, with Palestinians, and with the wider region.

Of course this collision between power and love is not particular to Israelis. It is universal, and many people have referred to it in different ways. Within myself, I can feel both the fierce, independent drive to be fully myself, and also the lonely, heart-broken drive to be in community. Systems thinker Barry Oshry talks about the leadership tasks of differentiation and integration. The *I Ching* talks about the masculine yang, the Creative, and also the feminine yin, the Receptive. And Indian entrepreneur Srinivas suggests that the whole of the Bhagavad Gita talks how to take decisive action while pursuing the good of the whole.

This collision between power and love is not easy to work with. Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson wrote: “Probably the most troublesome pair of opposites [that we can try] to reconcile is love and power. Our modern world is torn to shreds by this dichotomy and one finds many more failures than successes in the attempt to reconcile them.”

So how can we work with these two fundamental forces? Power and love are not the same, but nor are they opposed to one another. They are orthogonal; they are forces that exist in two different dimensions.

At Shell we worked with an Oxford professor of management named Charles Hampden-Turner. He taught us that most genuinely challenging situations involve not choices but dilemmas: situations where we are faced with a need to work with two orthogonal forces at the same time. Power and love constitute not a choice but a dilemma.

The Hampden-Turner way of working with this dilemma is to imagine a two-dimensional space, with power, the drive to act, on the x-axis, and love, the drive to connect, on the y-axis.

All power and no love is at 10-0: 10 on the x-axis and 0 on the y-axis. This all-power position says: "We can create a new social reality by pushing for what we know is best."

How do the all-love people characterize this all-power position? They say is it arrogant and degenerative, steamrolling over others. In King's words, it is "reckless and abusive."

All love and no power is at 0-10: 0 on the x-axis and 10 on the y-axis. This all-love position says: "We can create a new social reality by bringing people together." How do the all power people characterize this all-love position? They say is it impotent and ineffectual, all talk and no action. In King's words, it is "sentimental and anaemic."

Of course we can always compromise and sit at 5-5, the position of half-power and halflove. This position is like the joke of the man who says: "I speaka eighta languages, Englisha da best." Half-power and half-love are not sufficient to create new social realities.

So here is the question, the riddle, the challenge that I want to offer you this morning. How can we move beyond 10-0 and 0-10—beyond the collision between power and love? How can we move towards 10-10? How can we exercise power *with* love? How can we act *in* connection, in a world that is full? In summary: How can we co-create new social realities with all of our power and all of our love?